DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 194 495 SP 016 969

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TITLE Decision-Making and the Schools in the 1980's.
PUB DATE Jan 80
NOTE 10p.: Prepared for Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education "Needs of Elementary and Secondary Education in the 1980's: A Compendium of Policy Papers." For entire document (microfiche only), see ED 185 660. For individual documents (microfiche and paper copy), see SP 016 934.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Assessment; Educational Change; *Educational Needs; *Educational Objectives; *Educational Planning; Elementary Secondary Education; Expectation; Needs Assessment; *Outcomes of Education; Program Development; Program Effectiveness; *Program Evaluation; Student Responsibility

ABSTRACT

The modern school system has become overloaded with expectations, many of which simply cannot be met. A large part of the problem is that programs are instituted without planning, thought, or evaluation, and concepts like career education are taught separately instead of being integrated into the curriculum. Successful dealing with problems confronting American education will involve clearly and decisively addressing three basic areas: the problem of change in our society, the problem of goal setting, and the problem of systemmatic planning and evaluating. Although an examination of the present educational system may mean that many responsibilities assigned to and expected of schools will be assigned elsewhere, the educational system must continue to develop the means for helping individuals deal with an ever-changing and uncertain world. (SAS)

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DECISION-MAKING AND THE SCHOOLS IN THE 1980's

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Forecasting at best is a very risky enterprise regardless of what one is trying to predict, be it tomorrow's weather or the future of education in the 1980's. In a world in which we all find ourselves, the only really safe prediction is that the future will be quite different from either the present or the past. There should be no need to document for anyone the rapidity of change in all areas of our lives nor the fact that the rate of change is exponential rather than at a constant rate. Our educational system from preschool to graduate school, however, continues to operate much as it did in the early 1900's. While there have been some changes, they have generally been superficial and cosmetic. Yet, it is increasingly apparent to educators and the public at large that our educational system is not operating very satisfactorily in our technological world. The American educational system is under attack from all sides. The back to basics movement, the minimum competency testing movement, the teacher competency testing movement are all elements that reflect the general lack of confidence in our educational system. While the purpose of this paper is not to dwell on either the past or the present, it is important that we understand what has created the current crisis in American education because it is related to what may happen in the future.

The public's current reaction to public education in this country is not unlike the young boy who suddenly finds that his father is not able to do all things perfectly. Somehow over the years a mystique developed around schools such that they were seen as the means of guaranteeing to each individual personal

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and financial success. As Hoppe (1978) states, the view held of schools in this country is that "they must be stalwart and stable, committed to the highest ideals, teach all the basics and a great deal more to learners of all ages, attempt to correct all the social ills, and do it all at a modest cost" (p.1). The expectations reflected in Hoppe's statement have also been reflected in legislative and court actions that have occurred over the last 25 years.

> In 1954, the courts began a series of rulings on individual civil rights which placed demands on schools to become a means of eliminating racial discrimination. More recently the schools have been given major responsibilities for removing sex bias in society, for removing biases due to national origin, and for providing educational opportunities for all, regardless of their physical or mental status. Thus, schools are seen as powerful and important social institutions. The public and government have high expectations of them. (Blackburn, Walden, Warner, 1979, p. 27)

Thus, as a result of court rulings and legislation, the mission of public education in this country has changed from a rather simplistic expectation that the schools would produce people who could read, write, and figure to an expectation that the schools will produce a fully polished adult who understands all and can do all. Educators themselves cannot escape some responsibility for this phenomena. "We did not really object when we were told that public education could guarantee democracy, promote brotherly love, and give us a generation of well-adjusted citizens. We not only failed to voice any reservations, we appropriated such claims and used them in well-intentional campaigns for better funding" (Keller, 1978, p. 14-15). All of these forces have led to a situation where the expectations we all have for the schools go far beyond their capacity to produce. As the old saying goes, when one tries to be a jack of all trades, he generally ends up being master or none. It appears that this is one of the things that has happened to our educational system. In attempting to do so much, it has come to the point where it cannot do any of it very well.

Related to the changing demands placed on American public education is the changing school population. When public education was first conceived of in this country, there was no expectation that all young people would stay in school through a minimum of twelve grades. Yet, the common expectation in today's society is that students will complete a minimum of twelve years of public education, and that is rapidly changing to a minimum of fourteen years with the extension of the two-year/community college and technical school concept across this country. While there is no debate that our technological society does require increased levels of education of its people, one can seriously question whether the level of education being currently required is really commensurate with the knowledge required to do certain jobs. Validity studies of such requirements typically demonstrate that there is little relationship between such requirements and job success.

The history of the schools' attempts to deal with increased expectations and changing populations has been to try a variety of new methods, approaches and programs. We have tried all kinds of approaches to teaching reading, we have tried modern math, career education, affective career, values education, and on and on. Most of these approaches, methods, and/or programs were initiated with the support of federal dollars, and while that is not necessarily inappropriate, the position taken here is that the manner in which the funds were authorized and appropriated have caused far more problems than they were designed to cure.

Typical of the preceding, for example, was our rush to produce more mathematicians and scientists right after Russia sent up Sputnik. This effort produced the new math, new physics, new chemistry, new biology, etc., all or most of which have now been discarded. It also produced a generation of high school counselors and gave schools money to hire those counselors, but neither

the counselors themselves nor the schools knew for what reason they were there. Currently, we are rushing "back to the basics" and to minimum competency testing. And no one really knows what either of these terms really means nor what their implications are for our educational system, but we are going ahead anyway. If these were isolated examples, the situation would not be near as critical. Unfortunately, they reflect our usual way of initiating new programs within the American educational system. Someone gets excited about something and before we recognize what is happening we are operating a brand new program. These programs are all well intended and are most often generated to meet real needs, but the problem is they are neither well thought out, planned, and/or evaluated once they have been implemented. This lack of a systemmatic approach to program planning and monitoring dooms most programs before they begin.

Another aspect of program planning in the American educational system which leads to ultimate failure is the fact that programs are developed in ways which leads to the notion that there is something to be added to the regular ongoing program of the schools rather than being integrated into the existing program. This is exactly what has happened to programs like affective, career, and values education. The goal of affective education was to help young people develop an awareness of the importance of feelings and emotions. Yet, feelings and emotions do not occur in the abstract; they occur in relation to some content, event, or fact. We, however, attempted to teach them in the abstract as though they had no relation to subject matter. The same pattern has been true of the career education movement. Career Education is now mandated in many states, such as Georgia, as a separate subject. The intent of the developers of career education was never that it be a separate subject, but rather the concept was to be integrated into the existing program such that

students saw subject matter as preparation for a life-long career. While the development of this kind of "added on" thinking is often a result of administrative planning which does not involve the classroom teacher, it is more often a result of the way in which the regulations governing the use of the money were written. The federal regulations themselves often created the need for those programs to be discrete entities rather than integrated into ongoing programs. It is a classic example of the bureaucracy feeding upon itself in creating more bureaucracy. Unfortunately, it is the classroom teacher who must implement these programs and from their viewpoint they are being asked to do more and more in shorter and shorter spans of time.

These factors, as well as others, have brought our educational system to the brink of a new decade in a state of disarray. Public confidence is at a low ebb and even the confidence of educators is wavering. Most recognize that they cannot possibly do all that they have promised or been expected to do. The easy route at this point is to say we must go "back to the basics". We should return to doing what schools did pretty well up to World War II. That may appear to be the easy route and is the route being suggested by many individuals, but it is neither easy or the correct route. The pre-World War II basics were fine for pre-World War II times, but the times have changed. If our educational system is to survive, it cannot look back but must look ahead. Our educational leaders and legislators must do so with far more vision and with far more systematic planning than has ever occurred. As Toffler (1974) suggests, all of us involved with our educational system have been like the elders of a tribe living on a river bank who don't recognize that their lives will be changed by the new dam being constructed across the river. They, therefore, continue to teach their young the same old things in much the same old way. We have failed to recognize

that the rapidity of change in all areas of our lives means that the future is going to be very different from the present. Yet, as educators we have never really tried to anticipate what the future might look like and what implications it might have for education. "And so, most schools, colleges and universities base their teaching on the usually tacit notion that tomorrow's world will be basically familiar" (Toffler, 1974, p. 5). Thus, a return to the basics is not a reasonable answer to the problems facing American education. A return to the basics without a systemmatic attempt at evaluating and predicting what the future has in store will be a waste of human and financial resources, a waste we can ill afford.

It is this writer's view that if we are to be successful in dealing with the problems confronting American education we must be far different from Toffler's tribe. We must clearly and decisively address three basic areas: The problem of change in our society; the problem of goal setting; and the problem of systemmatic planning and evaluating.

The first problem relates to our ability to prioritize goals. As Keller (1978) suggests, we must promise not to continue promising. The point is that American education can no longer promise to do everything for everybody. We must seriously question such sacred cows as whether twelve years of public school education should be a requirement or is even desirable for all individuals. Is it possible that for many individuals an education firmly grounded in the basics is the education that is necessary for a successful and meaningful life? Such a suggestion is often met with disdain in this country because somehow the amount of formal education completed by an individual is tied with social standing. Such should not and need not be the case if we are willing to accept the fact that education is not the panacea for everyone. If we could free ourselves from that one basic assumption, schools might be free to truly examine their current

operations and to develop meaningful goals and objectives for the future; goals and objectives that are realistic, desirable, and, most importantly, implementable. Such an examination will mean, very probably, that many responsibilities currently assigned to the schools will be assigned elsewhere. It is also possible that the population of the school will change drastically. It may be that some individuals will go to public school for nine years and then to work for a few years and then back to school for a few more years. The point of this speculation is that, if we are to truly plan for the 1980's and beyond, we must begin by giving up some of our sacred cows; give them up at least to the point that we are willing to clearly examine the implications they have for education. It may well be that in the freeing up process we will clearly decide that the sacred cow is a sacred cow, but without such an examination we will never really know.

Given this careful assessment of goals and objectives for American education, the second problem becomes easier to handle. If our educational systems can develop a clear set of goals and objectives, the next step of developing clear, systemmatic plans for implementation and evaluation of programs once they have been implemented is a next natural step. It is this writer's belief that the amount of money being appropriated for education in today's world is probably sufficient to do the job if we could avoid duplication and unjustified expenses. Because programs are implemented without prior planning and because programs are allowed to operate without careful and systemmatic evaluation of their impact on the recipients of such programs, we have no clear notion of how cost effective any program really is in this country. I am not arguing that everything in the name of education in this country must past the scrutiny of cost benefit analysis, because I firmly believe that there are intangibles

that take place in our educational system which are not subject to cost analysis. I do believe, however, that the American public has a right to expect a greater return for their dollar, and our inability to give that return is directly related to our inability to ascertain what works for whom and under what circumstances. What this position calls for is not only a greater commitment to systemmatic planning and evaluation, but of the development of far more sophisticated means of examining what it is we do in the name of education.

As stated in the beginning of this paper, the one thing that we can be certain about as we look down the road is that education in the 1980's must be far different than education in the 1970's. Any futurist scholar will indicate how difficult it is to predict the exact form and substance of the future, but we do know that individuals existing in that future will be subject to a rate of change that continues to be exponential. Thus, it is clear that a top priority of education, if it is to be truly meaningful, must be to prepare individuals with the ability to deal with change and uncertainty. While some critics of the current educational system in this country believe that the most serious deficiency in the schools today is their failure to teach everybody to read, write, and to figure, it is this writer's view that the most serious deficiency is the inability of the school system to teach people how to deal with change through sound decision-making practices. I firmly believe that it is critical that American public education change its form such that individuals going through the system are required to make decisions that affect their lives.

Individuals proceeding through our current educational system are not only not taught how to make decisions, the system discourages the practice. While one might argue that there are few educational decisions that an elementary school youngster could make, that same argument cannot legitimately be used

for middle, junior and senior high school students. Yet, if one examines the types of decisions that individuals are allowed to make as they mature toward adulthood, it becomes very clear as to why individuals who reach the age of 18 are not able to make very sound decisions. As educators we tell young people what they must study, when they must study, how they must study, and with whom they must study. We also tell them what things they can participate in, what things they cannot participate in, what they can eat, what they can wear and not wear, etc., etc. The entire system is designed to protect people from making decisions that we (assuming some master knowledge) believe will hurt them. Yet, if someone is to learn the importance of decision making, is there any better way than to let them experience the process of making both good and erroneous decisions? I am not arguing that we must let students make decisions that would be tragic, but I do believe that we can permit them to make decisions commensurate with their ability to do so. How else can we expect someone to leave the educational system and suddenly be able to make decisions that society then requires of them? It is my contention that there is no more critical issue facing education in the 1980's. Schools and society in general must respond to the needs of individuals to be able to deal effectively with change through sound decision-making principles.

In summary, we cannot and must not move into the decade of the 1980's by seeking to recapture the success of the past. Those responsible for American education must look forward. They must develop the capacity for prioritizing goals and evaluating outcomes. Most importantly, the system must develop the means for helping individuals deal with an ever-changing and uncertain world. Only people with the capacity to make sound decisions will be able to cope with such a world.